

POLICY-MAKING

Policy-making, along with planning for the future, is one of the most critically important functions of the board of trustees. Policies are established to assure continuity in library operations, consistency in public accountability, and equity in providing library services. They must be flexible enough to apply to all library situations yet structured enough to provide direction.

Policy-making also provides trustees, director, and staff ways to evaluate the library's strengths and weaknesses, to reach consensus on the library's purposes and priorities, to clarify and strengthen relationships within the library, and to communicate the library's needs and achievements to the community at large.

Policy-making that achieves these multiple goals cannot be successfully achieved in a vacuum. It requires trustees to talk with and listen to the diverse community served by the library, to the library director, to other governmental units, as well as to other libraries in the community.

Coordination of Policy-making With the Library Director

While the role of trustees is to craft policies that will govern and guide the library, it is the role of the library director to establish library service programs and operational procedures by interpreting policies.

Policy-making is best accomplished in close coordination with the library director. The board usually asks the director to prepare background information and write the draft, or the director may work jointly with a committee of the board.

Preparation usually includes:

- Researching the topic.
- Drafting the initial policy statement for board discussion.
- Describing options and how they may impact library operations.
- Identifying long term and short term impact on the library and its customers.
- Estimating budget and staff impact.
- Identifying legal implications as well as assuring compliance with best practices and professional standards.
- Making recommendations.

Policy-making in Municipal Libraries

Each municipal library board needs to review and understand its authority as described in the city municipal code. A review of the Municipal Research and Services Center database of city codes revealed a number of differences. Some city boards of trustees hire the director and adopt policy for the library while others have limited governing and policy-making powers. Two examples that demonstrate the differences can be read in Chapter 3 of this *Reference Manual*.

Mission Statement is the Foundation for Policy

The fundamental policy of the library is the mission statement. This brief statement provides the nucleus for strategic and long-range plans, annual plans, and policies. (See Chapter 16 for further discussion of planning.)

Characteristics of an Effective Policy

An effective policy will:

- Align with the library mission statement.
- Provide the foundation for library plans and goals.
- Protect the rights of the diverse community served by the library and treat all persons fairly and consistently.
- Clearly guide the director and staff as they proceed to implement the board's decisions.
- Establish consistent overall direction for services and operations, but not establish procedures.
- Protect the rights of staff and treat all staff fairly and consistently.
- Provide a framework that anticipates needs and problems.
- Adhere to federal, state, and local laws.
- Align with other policy statements, avoiding contradictions.
- Reflect current and best public library practices, including primary policy statements of the Washington Library Association and the American Library Association.
- Specify how complaints or suggestions may be made and describe the review process.
- Establish consistent and lawful consequences on topics such as suspensions or fines.

Plan for Regular Review in Order to Adopt New or Revised Policies

Policies are the “bedrock” upon which sound library management decisions are made, but they definitely are not carved in stone. Even new policies need to be reviewed to assure that they are functioning as anticipated.

Sometimes policy review is initiated because of the advent of new technology such as the Internet, at other times the board may recognize a gap that suggests the need for a policy. Problems or misunderstandings reported by the library director may indicate need for a new or revised policy. New laws, changes in the community, the desire to establish a new library service—all may indicate the need to review policies and assure that they are current and still appropriate.

Federal, state or local laws may require specific policies. Trustees need to assure that policies reflect requirements of the most recent legislation.

Because trustees may be called upon to defend or interpret policies to the public or to authorities, it is essential that trustees establish a method to assure that library policies are regularly reviewed to assure that they are clear, legal, consistent, and defensible.

Public Comment on Proposed Policies

Public comment on policies should be expected, because all board meetings are open to the public. More importantly, the board should invite comment in order to keep the public aware of library issues. Some proposed policies elicit little public interest. Others will be controversial and the board should be prepared for public hearings that result in heated debate.

Policies are rarely adopted in a single meeting. The board needs time to consider public comment and staff and legal counsel need to review a policy before adoption.

Relationship to Operational Policies and Procedures

Operational policies and procedures emanate from board-adopted policies. Operational documents spell out procedures, establish standards, delineate how the policies are applied, describe exceptions, etc. Operational documents do not require board approval because they are based on board approved policy statements.

Policies are Public Records

Policies must be adopted by a majority vote of the board of trustees. State law requires that library policies be available for review upon customer request. The best approach is to number each policy, include the effective date, and arrange them in a loose leaf binder that includes an index. The policy binder usually includes copies of, or reference to, the local, state, or federal laws that also impact the library.

While the library will make print copies of policies available for library customers, it is good practice to also post some policies on the library Website. Posted policies usually include eligibility for service, children's access to materials, the Internet policy and circulation policies as well as the mission statement and long-range plan.

Library board and staff access to policy statements may be provided via an internal Website or print copies.

Announcing Newly Adopted Policies

Policies that impact the use of the library and services need to be publicized to the community through announcements and interviews with the media, meetings with community organizations and others so they know and understand the rationale underlying the policy. It is the responsibility of all trustees to support policies once the board adopts them. They must also support the staff because they will be the first to defend a policy after it is implemented and challenges occur.

Selected List of Federal and State Laws Requiring Policies

The board is ultimately responsible for assuring that federal and state laws are reflected in library policies and procedures and that the constitutional rights of individuals are protected. The following list provides a brief overview of some federal and state laws—it is not comprehensive. Assistance may be available from federal and state agencies through their print publications and Internet Websites, as well as their periodic training workshops. It may be helpful to consult the library legal counsel to assure that policies are in compliance. The Municipal Research and Services Center is another information resource.

Age Discrimination Employment Act (ADEA)

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Civil rights laws

Clean Indoor Air Act

Equal opportunity employment and affirmative action

Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)

Immigration Reform and Control Act

Minimum wage

Washington Industrial Safety And Health Act (WISHA):

Open Public Meetings Act

Public Records Act (Includes confidentiality of library circulation records)

Competitive bidding

Fair Campaign Practices Act